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Hope and dread in representing Palestine-Israel: A case study of editorials in the British broadsheets

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ABSTRACT

Part of a comprehensive study to analyse British broadsheets' coverage of the First Gaza War, this paper examines the moral arguments presented in editorials. Doing so, it showcases a non-dualist, relational inquiry of the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead of focusing on what is empirically 'true', morally 'right', and ethnically 'Israeli/Jewish' or 'Palestinian/Arab' as extra-discursive categories, it approaches them as discursive constructions and asks what relations, what forms of lives the editorials cultivate in representing them. The analysis demonstrates that whilst newspapers overwhelmingly imagine isolated and ahistorical essences to clash in Palestine-Israel, they do not exclusively do so. Traces of a discourse of relations, where 'I' (Palestinian or Israeli) is partly constituted by the 'Other' (Israeli or Palestinian) can also be found in the editorials. It is with the vicissitudes of such relational accounts that the article concludes.

1. Introduction to a relational inquiry

Academic and journalistic discussions alike pose the question to various representations of the Israeli-Palestinian predicament: is it true or biased (Philo and Berry, 2004, 2011; cf., Gaber, Seymour and Thomas, 2009; Kemp, 2011; Shreim and Dawes, 2015)? As these inquiries contrast the record of the medium with a version assigned the status of truth, the perspective that overwhelmingly dominates them is whether the representation is true to the objective record and displays the corresponding cognitive-moral virtues, or it is pro-Israeli/-Palestinian and covers a corresponding authorial cognitive or moral deficit.

The question whether something is true or biased is so common that it feels counter-intuitive to enquire as to what it means. Yet, in seeking to provide a framework for the British representation of the 2008-2009 war between the IDF and Hamas, the starting point of this paper is precisely the dilemma of what this question – is a representation true or biased (pro-Israeli/Palestinian)? – entails, and whether it is a good starting point for engaging with issues of Palestine-Israel. As the question itself is laden with meaning, its productive power cannot be overlooked and it cannot but lead to answers that do not so much *reflect* on their purported referent of Israel-Palestine, but *constitute* it in dilemmatic ways (Butler, 2005).

What we have when the question is asked whether a given representation is pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian is a series of *dualistic and dichotomous assumptions* (Benjamin, 2004). First, we have two communities, separate from each other and defining in their separation the relevant political-moral field. To ask whether a given representation is pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian means giving exclusive primacy to two essentially separate categories, Israeli (Jew) and Palestinian (Arab), in constructing the conflict, at the expense of any alternative categories and relations the political-moral imagination could use. Second, we have a representation assigned the status of truth, to which constructions are compared to but which, itself, is not discussed as a construction: it is not chosen but simply found, and represents no political-moral perspective as such. It is, therefore, self-evident to anyone *in their right mind*. Third, as a consequence, failure to comply with the standard of (self-evident) truth automatically prompts the question: why did some representation, instead of following the path of truth, ended up pro-this/-that? The failure of representation results in the dilemma of cognitive or moral deficit. Opposite to the moral quality required to correspond to the true representation of the conflict, we have dumbness or madness or badness.

To be sure, the dilemmas of truth and justice are necessary for our political-moral conduct and cannot be dismissed or bracketed. The question rather is the function these dominant *dualistic and dichotomous* assumptions serve to approach morality and political action concerning the representations of Palestine-Israel. For the argument of this paper is that they are neither inevitable, nor desirable. The gaze that pre-forms representations as pro-Israeli/pro-Palestinian on the basis of two strictly separate communities and one pre-existing objective truth, and that subsequently examines what deficit led to possible bias can and should be challenged.

Indeed, critical scholarship has upbraided contemporary inquiries for 'tak[ing] for granted the distinction of Arab and Jew as two polarized identities having been constituted independently of each other' and of those intellectual traditions that constituted the polarized distinction in the first place (Anidjar, 2005: xvii). Such critical inquiries are characterised by a refusal to study representations of the Jew (the Israeli) and the Arab (the Palestinian) *assuming* the existence of these categories to be completely independent of the representations themselves. Instead, they seek to examine how, in these representations, the dichotomous imagination replaces (or is resisted by) potential and actual inter-community relations. In the place of facts pre-dating discourse, the dichotomous conception of the (Israeli) 'Jew' and (Palestinian) 'Arab' itself becomes an opposition emerging out of particular (yet not particularly appealing) human relations.

Thus, we find for instance the familiar dichotomous order constituted at the very foundations of the 'invisible third' of European Christianity, in whose self-definition the Jew finds itself as a religious entity (and, as such, becomes the enemy within) whilst the Arab finds itself as a political entity (and, as such,

becomes the enemy without) (Anidjar, 2005). Alternatively, we find the dichotomous conception of Jew *versus* Arab in the invisible third of 'military logic' that seeks to impose its categorical interpretation on an existing web of cross/trans-ethnic relations between 1947-1949 in Palestine, and create thereby from complex 'civilian' identities one dimensional ones for (and at) war (Azoulay, 2011, 2013). Or we find it in contemporary British liberal institutions (such as universities) that actively pre-form and perpetuate a particular type of agonistic community relation where any ambiguity is deleted from the picture in advance (Sheldon, 2016).

These anti-dualistic and anti-foundational attempts to engage with the role of the 'invisible third' that constitutes the dichotomous Jew versus Arab order may be taken as extensions of a broadly relational poststructuralist or postcolonial agenda (Butler, 1993; Said, 1978, 2004), and, as such, may also be applied to the other dichotomies underpinning discourse concerning the representations of the Israeli-Palestinian predicament. Just as the assumption of a foundational Jew versus Arab dichotomy can be replaced by an examination of what discourses might sustain this dichotomy, how they sustain it and at a cost of neglecting what alternatives, so truth and political-moral justice may be *included* in our analysis of representations, rather than simply assumed to exist independently of those representations (Butler, 2005).

Thus, the dualistic assumptions that appear to govern the majority of discussions examining the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian predicament are by no means necessary assumptions. There is no reason therefore why we should start our inquiry with the presumption that distinct categories such as 'Arab', 'Jew', 'truth', 'bias' pre-date and have an extraneous impact on accounts. Instead, we could start by asking how these very categories are envisaged in the accounts we examine. Indeed, replacing the received dualistic concern with pre-established truth, morality, pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian bias, examining the British broadsheets' editorial coverage of the first Gaza war, this paper will enquire what reality and *what relationships are allowed by a given political-moral imagination for the protagonists of the conflict*. What kinds of relationships are, explicitly or implicitly, constructed as possible?

2. Contextual and methodological considerations

The sample for the empirical investigation of these theoretical questions was editorials published by British daily broadsheets or quality newspapers (*Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *Independent*, *The Times*) during the 2008-2009 'First Gaza war' or 'Operation Cast Lead' (Kaposi, 2014). In total, twenty-three editorials were analyzed with a focus on the two traditional dilemmas of war, *ius ad bellum* (i.e., was the Israeli government's choice to launch the war justified?) and *ius in bello* (i.e., was the conduct of the Israeli Defense Forces and Hamas in the war justified?). The variety of ways in which these questions were engaged with by the newspapers opened up a variety of ways of envisaging who the main agents of the war were, what their role, entitlement and responsibility consisted of, and how they related to other relevant agents.

The political-moral importance of neither the tumultuous Israeli-Palestinian conflict nor the theoretical perspective focusing on dichotomous-dualistic interpretations may be in question. Indeed, they increasingly appear to resonate with global concerns of increasing tribalisation, polarisation and

demonization. However, the same significance and resonance is far from obvious with regard to the chosen sample. In short, why Britain? Why British newspapers? And why their editorials?

To start with the first question, Britain's role in the politics of Palestine uniquely fits the theoretical concerns introduced in the previous section and may arguably be taken to embody the position of the 'invisible third': that which supposedly represents without being explicitly represented. Historically speaking, what is now simply referred to as the Arab-Israeli or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict evolved under the rule and within the frameworks provided by Britain as the mandatory power. Arabs and Jews did not find themselves in a neutral space, but one that was pre-formed by the British, and where they had not only to convince (or fight) each other but persuade (or fight) the British. The British gaze had therefore argued to be constitutive as to what became of the conflict, and what eventually became of Arabs and Jews in Palestine (Segev, 2001). And whilst the nature of British involvement obviously changed since British troops and officials had comprehensively left mandatory Palestine in 1948, the British viewpoint to this day not only continues to represent the all-important 'international opinion' for many in Israel/Palestine but continues to play a constitutive role in Israeli and Palestinian self-representations (Herman, 2017).

How, then, would we interrogate this 'British viewpoint'? Where do we find it, what would properly represent it? There may be arguments that the best practice would be to consider official, diplomatic acts of the state; alternatively, opinion surveys or the vast realm of social media could be consulted. Whilst these would be reasonable choices, the decision to focus on quality newspapers may also be supported by a number of arguments. First, despite the fall in their circulation figures and the rise of alternative media, broadsheets still retain much of their power to influence public and political opinion. As various contemporary researchers suggest, print journalism still in significant respects leads and forms public-political agenda in contrast to the 'echo chamber' of social media (Deacon and Wring, 2016; Jackson and Thorsen, 2015). And second, the broadsheets examined cover virtually the whole of the British political spectrum, from the firmly conservative (*Daily Telegraph*), through the moderately conservative (*The Times*) and the liberal (*Financial Times*), to the left-liberal (*Guardian, Independent*).¹ Incidentally, such positions are also taken to correspond to views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with those on the right-wing considered to be more in support of the State of Israel and critical of Palestinians, and those on the left more critical of Israel and more supportive of Palestinian efforts (Philo and Berry, 2004, 2011).

Editorials, to turn now to the last question concerning the choice of the sample, admittedly form a tiny part of the newspapers' output. Yet, they present an overall and overarching perspective of narratives and arguments that other parts of the newspapers do not. This does not just mean that they may be taken to form the backbone of the publication, or the explication of the viewpoint which then will dominate the newspaper as a whole. It also means that these editorials were the best candidates for embodying this abstract concept of a 'British view'. Quantitatively speaking, they were not as widely read as data that could have been collected from Twitter. Qualitatively speaking, they were not on the level of sophistication that could have been gained from engaging with arguments proposed by moral philosophers. They were, however, what seemed as the best available forum in the sense of being *both sufficiently accessed by the many and sophisticated enough for the few*.

¹ In March 2016 the *Independent* became an online only publication.

Of course, it is only so far these *a priori* arguments can take us. To justify the relevance and significance of the sample chosen, it is now to its analysis that we have to turn.

3. The discourse of isolated essences: Daily Telegraph and Guardian

We join the British broadsheets right at the beginning of the war, with the dilemma of whether Israel's choice of launching the operation can be justified. At first, the conservative *Daily Telegraph's* editorial engagement will be examined. It started with the following argument:

Extract 1.

The first reaction of most commentators was that the air attacks on Gaza were unnecessarily savage. The deaths of nearly 300 Palestinians, including civilians, seems disproportionate to the small number of Israelis killed by rocket attacks. [...] But, before we jump to conclusions, we should pay close attention to the response of Mahmoud Abbas, chairman of the Palestinian National Authority. He blamed Hamas for triggering the Israeli raids by not extending its truce. His Fatah party is engaged in a vicious feud with Hamas, so this is perhaps what one would expect him to say. But he is right, none the less. Hamas did engineer this crisis, by firing rockets whose range has been increased so they can reach southern Israeli cities. (Daily Telegraph, 29 December)

The dilemma about Israel's right to launch the war is answered uncompromisingly: the newspaper considers Israel's opting for 'Operation Cast Lead' entirely justified. Indeed, in this argument the Jewish state does not even choose the right course of action. Inasmuch as Hamas 'triggered' or 'engineered' the war, Israel did not quite exercise a choice. It was *caused* to act and did therefore launch the war by necessity. As such, it is not so much that the *Telegraph* makes Israel look right in a political-moral sense; Israel is beyond critical deliberation and without any substantive political-moral role in this argument.

This, however, brings up the question of what it is in Hamas's action that 'triggered' automatically the war. Although we read about the organization 'not extending its truce' and 'firing rockets' into southern Israeli cities, the material effects of these rockets are not spelled out. In fact, here or elsewhere, the only thing we learn about them is the 'small number of Israelis' that were killed by them. This leaves us wondering what exactly it is in the rockets that automatically 'trigger' a war, and how the killing of vastly more people in preventing the killing of an admittedly 'small number' can possibly be the morally right course of action.

Extract 2.

Only one group of people can have derived any satisfaction from the footage of blood-covered children being pulled from the rubble in Gaza: the fanatics of Hamas. This terrorist organisation has been firing rockets into Israel ever since the breakdown of the ceasefire, in the hope of provoking a furious Israeli response. And that is precisely what materialised.

[...] Hamas is not a reasonable political movement. It cannot thrive without crisis; the blood of innocents is its own lifeblood. These are not Palestinian nationalists who happen to be Muslims; they are totalitarian Islamists whose Palestinian identity is of

secondary importance. They have nothing but contempt for Arab Muslim states' (Daily Telegraph, 29 December)

As the editorial continues, our attention is drawn not to the rockets themselves but their provenance, Hamas. While fighting Israel, Hamas does not fight for 'Arab Muslim states' or even for 'Palestinians' or for 'children [...] pulled from the rubble of Gaza'. Its 'fanaticism' and 'antisemitism', its hatred of Jews and concomitant wish to 'wipe out Israel' is not matched by anything constructive. As it wishes to 'wipe out [...] eventually, every secular Arab state' too and 'hope[s] to provoke a furious Israeli response' that results in 'the footage of blood-covered children' (Daily Telegraph, 29 December), the image we encounter in the *Telegraph* is not simply of a terrorist organisation, but one of *nihilism*. And as it is *total destruction* that is located as the essence of Hamas, this will also be the quality that the rockets embody. Regardless of the actual material consequences rockets cause, what determines the political-moral choices of the situation is the exclusively destructive intention that guides them towards Israel.

It is by constructing Hamas as an agent of pure destruction that the *Telegraph* accounts for why Israel is without substantive political-moral role in this conflict and why Israel's waging war is not so much the morally right choice but the moral imperative any reasonable human being could possibly countenance. This way non-engagement and the complete lack of political-moral relations between Israel and Hamas, between pure victim and impure perpetrator, becomes not so much a practical impossibility but a *sacred necessity*. Support for Israel is absolute – but only on the equally absolute condition of Israel fulfilling its (non-)role.

Needless to say, (left-)liberal newspapers had a different evaluation of the events. They all criticized the Israeli government's choice of going to war, and suggested what they thought was the reasonable alternative of negotiations between Israel and Hamas. Yet, given that the *Daily Telegraph's* verdict on 'law to war' was based on Hamas being essentially destructive, the alternative solution of (left-)liberals entails addressing the pivotal issue of what Hamas is and whether negotiations are in fact possible with them. We will now look at how the different assessment of the political-moral situation impacted on the (left-)liberal *Guardian's* construction of the identity of the conflicting parties and the possibility of relations between them.

Extract 3.

The Palestinians have always had a rejectionist wing, which for so long was represented by Fatah. Israel, too, has those who reject a Palestinian state, including many settlers. To think a solution can be found by killing rejectionists is to deny the entire course of the history of the Middle East. There is no military solution to Hamas's rockets, which continued to rain down on Israel yesterday. Nor is a ground invasion likely to stop the rockets. It could displace them, perhaps. But if that happened, Hamas's next tactic could be to use the Palestinians of East Jerusalem to wield the launch tubes. (Guardian, 29 December)

As the newspaper announces that there is 'no military solution' to the rockets, it is a very different image of Hamas from the *Telegraph's* that we encounter. Not only is the Palestinian organisation branded with the fairly non-threatening term 'rejectionist', the object of their 'rejectionism' is never specified. What is more, even this non-threatening and object-less term is immediately qualified by asserting that Israel, too, has rejectionists. 'Rejectionism' thus becomes a trivial characteristic of the

conflict, nothing that would make Hamas become overly problematic when contemplating the possibility of negotiations.

The construction of Hamas's identity as a trivial one is a dominant characteristic of the *Guardian's* argumentation. Elsewhere, we read the *Guardian* bluntly asserting that Hamas is 'more than a guerilla army': a 'political movement as well' (5 January); and that 'their tactic and their strategy is no more and no less than resistance' (29 December). Whilst no arguments are offered to support such judgments, the trivialization of Hamas certainly impacts on the newspaper's construction of the rockets' meaning:

Extract 4.

The death toll by last night had climbed to nearly 290, with more than 700 wounded. This in reply to hundreds of rockets from Hamas militants which killed one Israeli in six months. But the equation is always like this. (*Guardian*, 29 December)

The Hamas rockets are depicted as inconsequential in the passage above. In line with the *Guardian's* general construction of Hamas's conduct, they are not suggested either to constitute any substantial obstacle to dialogue.

So what *is* the obstacle? As from a moral necessity to counter destructive nihilism Israel's war turned into a moral choice whose only use is to bring about massive human suffering; from an entity with a destructive evil essence, Hamas turned into a relatively unproblematic agent; and from a naturalistic cause for war Hamas rockets turned into relatively inconsequential events, we have just witnessed the wholesale reorganization of the political-moral field. In line with this, the *Guardian* presented Israel too in a light unrecognizable from the conservative narrative. Extract 3 did not just trivialize Hamas's contribution to the conflict. It did in fact pinpoint the Israeli aim of killing rejectionists as problematic. Extract 4 did not just establish the gross disparity between casualty numbers, but pinpointed it as a regularity. As these passages did not simply present Hamas as posing no insurmountable problem in the way of negotiations but started also to hint at a construction of Israel which does, it comes as no surprise that in a later editorial the *Guardian* explicitly attributes to Israel an 'intransigent refusal to talk to [its] enemies' (14 January).

Yet, as replacing the conservative image of Hamas it is Israel that becomes responsible for the war, we are once again left with the question of an account. If it is Israel that is ultimately accountable for the bloodshed, what is it that causes Israeli intransigence in going against peaceful solutions? Why are the vastly disproportionate casualty figures parts of a pattern? Why do Israelis 'deny the entire course of the history of the Middle East' in persisting to kill rejectionists on the other side?

Extract 5.

A hammer blow is intended to terrorise and that is exactly what Israel did yesterday. Dr Haidar Eid, a Gazan academic who saw the bodies and children with amputated limbs, told Haaretz journalist Amira Hass: 'To pick a time like this, 11:30 (AM), to bomb in the hearts of cities, this is terrible. This choice was intended to cause as large a massacre as possible.' The targets were not the training camps of Hamas's military wing, which were empty when the jets struck, but rather police stations. The raids were intended to destroy the infrastructure on which Hamas builds its administrative as much as its military hold over Gaza. But that means killing policemen, not just the militants who assemble and fire the rockets. Presumably it also means targeting judges, officials, and

doctors too. (Guardian, 29 December)

The *Guardian* here raises a question that could not be raised in the framework of the *Daily Telegraph*: what is the reason for an 11.30am start of the war? Yet the introduction of Israel's responsibility is met not so much with an attempt at critical deliberation as with immediate and extreme condemnation. The State of Israel is judged as 'intending to terrorize' and 'intend[ing] to cause as large a massacre as possible', as well as, later in the same editorial, showing 'the same indifference to human life as [it] charges its enemies with'. And as the image of Israel in this construction starts to resemble that of Hamas in that of the *Telegraph*, the ultimate account of the *Guardian* for Israeli action may not come as a surprise:

Extract 6.

'We are very violent,' Lieutenant Colonel Amir, commander of an Israeli combat engineers unit, admitted as he explained that he will use any method to prevent casualties among his troops. Meysa a-Samuni would not disagree. She is the 19-year-old survivor of the shelling of a house in the Zeitoun district of Gaza in which 30 people died, six of them members of her family. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs would not disagree either. [...]

None of this is new. Those who remember the details of past military campaigns waged by Israel, a country which claims higher moral standards than its neighbours, will experience an overpowering sense of *deja vu*. (Guardian, 10 January)

The passage conveys a series of assertions metonymically standing for all parties concerned: Israel, Palestinians, the international community. They represent a unanimous verdict with which the *Guardian* may be taken to fully (if implicitly) concur. Thus, similar to the *Telegraph's* account of Hamas, what the *Guardian's* ultimate account intimates is that not only is Israel violent in deeds and violent in intention; it appears *violently destructive in being*. And as regards the other agent of the equation, just as for the *Telegraph* Israeli agency was not so much good as virtually non-existent, so does Palestinian or Hamas agency not even enter the equation for the *Guardian*.

Thus, what on the surface appeared as two very different accounts of the war may have proved to be rather similar. Both newspapers offered a decontextualized understanding of agency, where neither historical nor present relations played any role in understanding moral responsibility. Instead, the agents constituted polar opposite essences where what varied was solely who played the role of 'Bad', and who played virtually no role whatsoever; who is to be blamed and who, by and large, is innocent. The (Israeli) Jew and the (Palestinian) Arab were therefore imagined of different substances, and with any relation between them being not just practically non-existing but an outright theoretical impossibility (Benjamin, 2004; Said, 2004).

4. A discourse of relations: The Times and the Financial Times

The examples examined above are representative of the newspapers' general perspective on the events: it was with recourse to a decontextualized discourse of isolated essences that the British

broadsheets most of the time approached the conflict (Kaposi, 2014).² *But not all of the time.* In what follows, two instances will be analyzed where an alternative discourse is present: the binary of pure and impure, blameworthy and innocent become entangled, and the possibility of past and present relations becomes a tangible prospect.

In contrast to the *Daily Telegraph*, pondering the dilemma of 'law to war' the conservative *The Times* held a position open to a critical perspective *vis-a-vis* Israel's conduct. Maintaining though Israel's right to launch the war, the newspaper asked the question whether launching the war was in fact the right thing to do. Accordingly, the newspaper's perspective allowed for the existence of a Hamas that is not the paragon of nihilistic destruction and an Israel that does not just automatically respond but makes choices (Kaposi, 2016).

Given its non-dichotomous critical perspective on *ius ad bellum*, it will be interesting to see how this perspective developed as the newspaper came to discuss *ius in bello*.

Extract 7.

Eleven days ago *The Times* reported that Israel appeared to be using white phosphorus shells over built-up areas of Gaza. Since then, Israeli spokesmen and women have issued a series of increasingly forlorn denials as the number of Palestinian deaths in Gaza has passed 1,000 and many of the injured have been treated for burns caused, apparently, by white phosphorus.

It is time to clear the air. [...] (The Times, 16 January)

The newspaper, being the first in the world to report of Israel's questionable use of white phosphorous and the only one amongst the British broadsheets that discussed it in its editorials, does not mince its words (Kaposi, 2016). First, it does not just lament the number of Palestinian deaths or the general conditions in which the people of Gaza are. Material, tagible Israeli weapons containing the chemical substance of white phosphorous are mentioned, making hence the Israeli army explicitly accountable. Second, it concludes its description with an explicit call for explanation. As it unequivocally asserts that '[i]t is time to clear the air', Israel's role becomes an object of moral scrutiny. Thus, a thoroughgoing critical perspective is opened up on the agent the newspaper otherwise is mostly in sympathy with. In the place of purity and innocence, we have moral responsibility; in the place of the discourse of essences, the discourse of relations.

Where does *The Times* take the emerging discourse of Israeli responsibility? A doubly intriguing argument unfolds.

Extract 8.

It is time to clear the air. Israel has a right to defend itself, and the nature of its enemy makes that task extraordinarily hard. Hamas, like Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, regards the use of civilians as human shields as a central plank of its strategy for tormenting Israel. [Its] rallying cry is not the creation of a Palestinian state but the destruction of the Jewish one. This is why, when a ceasefire ended last month with an

² Despite its absence from the present analysis, this statement encompasses the *Independent* too. For the analysis of the *Independent*, see Kaposi, 2014: 61-66, 74-79, 142-147.

onslaught of Hamas rockets aimed at civilian Israeli targets, Israel had no choice but to prosecute this war. (*The Times*, 16 January)

First, the moral scrutiny of Israel regarding *ius in bello* commences by invoking *ius ad bellum*. Second, as Hamas is depicted ‘using [Palestinian] civilians as human shields’ and aiming not for ‘the creation of a Palestinian state but the destruction of the Jewish one’; and as Israel is consequently depicted having had ‘no choice but to prosecute this war’, we are presented with an argument concerning *ius ad bellum* which is certainly familiar from the *Telegraph* – but which never previously featured in *The Times* (Kaposi, 2016).

Yet, even if Hamas has retroactively become the agent of total destruction and Israel the agent of moral purity they never hitherto were, there is of course more to be discussed on the matter. As *The Times* itself reported white phosphorous shells found on the ground, the role of the Israeli Defense Forces cannot be overlooked.

Extract 9.

White phosphorus is illegal under international law when used in built-up areas, but a legitimate weapon of war when used to provide cover for troops in open country. There is scant evidence of the IDF using it deliberately against civilians, but northern Gaza, where the fighting is concentrated, is one of the most densely populated places in the world. Civilian casualties were inevitable, and the deep burns that white phosphorus can cause are virtually untreatable. The longer that the IDF equivocate about its use, the more ammunition they hand to those who would accuse them of war crimes. (*The Times*, 16 January)

The passage with which *The Times* closes its discussion of white phosphorous and Israeli responsibility is rather striking. It is asserted that white phosphorous is illegal ‘when used in built-up areas’, and that the IDF appears to have used it in ‘northern Gaza [...] one of the most densely populated places in the world’. When concluding, however, this critical perspective is not followed (by, say, calling for an independent inquiry into Israel’s use of white phosphorous or even by calling on the IDF to stop using the substance). Instead, by calling merely an end to official ‘equivocation’ on the matter, the editorial delegates critical judgement entirely to the authority of Israel. Curiously, the critical perspective on Israel is ultimately redirected to shadowy characters for whom claims about Israeli use of white phosphorous are mere ‘ammunition’ to ‘accuse Israel of war crimes’.

Thus, whilst *The Times’* coverage presented a perspective of critical judgment different from decontextualized essences, this critical perspective was never quite taken to what may appear its logical conclusion. The more it seemed a practical possibility supported by facts, legal conventions and moral arguments (all of which dutifully taken up by *The Times*), the less the newspaper was able to follow it up. The more the actual responsibility of Israel became interrogated, the more *Hamas* became demonized. Providing a clear alternative though to the essentializing discourse showcased in the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian*, *The Times’* alternative discourse eventually de-composed itself just as it became more convincingly put together.

In fact, of the broadsheets’ editorials covering the war, there is one single line of argumentation where a perspective of relations and the constitutive importance of past and present context

could systematically be present. To examine its vicissitudes, we will now turn to the *Financial Times*' construction of Hamas.

Extract 10.

Yet Israel, backed by the US and the mute assent of Europe, has sought to isolate Hamas. After Hamas fought it out with Fatah and ejected it from Gaza 18 months ago, the 1.5m Gazans have suffered a blockade rationing food, fuel and medicine entering the enclave.

This policy makes Palestinians dependent on Hamas for basic needs. It makes violence an attractive alternative both when (Hamas) truces fail to lift the blockade and (Fatah) peace talks fail to deliver peace. It is in any case delusional for Israel to imagine it can make peace with half the Palestinians while waging war on the other half. (Financial Times, 29 December)

In contrast to its presentation in the *Guardian*, Hamas in the *Financial Times* did not become trivialized as a relatively innocent entity. It is described as 'violent' and living a 'vainglorious delusion'. However (and, incidentally, once again in contrast to the *Guardian*), it does become in the passage above situated in a dynamics of human relations. It becomes an agent which is responsive to and partly constituted by, first, the population of Gaza; second, the truce between Israel and Hamas; and third, the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Hamas therefore becomes an agent which is neither trivial (*Guardian*) nor something evil-like (*Telegraph*, *The Times*), but one that is, simply, *human*. And as such, it also becomes an agent which lives amidst other human agents and emerges with respect to these human relations.

Extract 11.

Israel's refusal to treat (sic!) with Hamas is understandable, if futile. The destructive fury of its assault on Gaza was not only intended to get over the relative failure of its 2006 war on Hizbollah in Lebanon. Israel was also determined not to repeat the outcome to its 1996 Lebanon war, which ended with codified and internationally underwritten rules of engagement with Hizbollah.

But Israeli unilateralism is a blind alley. Its unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 has resolved nothing. The existence of organisations such as Hamas and Hizbollah – which both arose as responses to Israeli occupation – cannot simply be wished away. (Financial Times, 22 January)

In this extract, human relations acquire an historical dimension. The origins of Hamas are explained as a response to particular Israeli policies. And as we see how Israeli actions have been contributing to what Hamas would become, the passage implies an historical account of Israeli agency too. Israel becomes not just an agent that *responds* to Hamas, but one that has been, willy-nilly, contributing to the conduct of Hamas.

Indeed, it is from such a perspective that Israeli action in general and the role of the Israeli occupation in particular is presented: not simply something bad, or some crime, or some simple

act of oppression – but a mode of relating to other agents and a way of contributing to other identities.

Extract 12.

It must be remembered that the root cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the Israeli occupation – which Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza was meant to consolidate, through its subsequent expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Arab east Jerusalem. (Financial Times, 29 December)

Of course, there were newspapers during the war which condemned Israel with more rhetorical flourish. But just as no other newspaper came anywhere near the frequency the *Financial Times* occasioned the Israeli occupation in its editorial arguments³, no other newspaper came anywhere near to position it as centrally in their arguments as the *Financial Times* did: 'the root cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict'. This might be because no other newspaper entertained more systematically the discourse of human relations as opposed to human essences, and, therefore, no other newspaper sought to account for the war in terms of past and present relations instead of decontextualized individual substances. In accounting for Hamas, the *Financial Times* implied not the question whether it was them or Israel to be blamed for the war, but what problematic and hurtful political-moral relations have led to the emergence of Hamas as it is.

At the same time, as the newspaper reaches 'the root cause' of the conflict, the question arises as to how it then accounts for *Israel's* conduct. What is it that may explain Israel's occupation; what is the human reality that contribute to *this* political-moral reality?

Extract 13.

The disproportionate scale of Israeli air strikes, in response to the pinprick provocations of the home-made rockets fired from Gaza at southern Israeli towns, is less surprising. It fits the Israeli doctrine of overwhelming force, which on Saturday claimed the highest number of Palestinian lives in a single day since Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 Six Day War. (Financial Times, 29 December)

Disproportionate conduct is explained here with recourse to a 'doctrine of overwhelming force', with the 'doctrine' invoked here possibly going back to the early right-wing Zionist Ze'ev Jabotinsky's concept of the 'iron wall' (Shlaim, 2004). Clearly, by referring to the somewhat pejorative term of a 'doctrine', the *Financial Times* indicates its disapproval. But what it invokes implies neither the manifestation of a violent essence nor madness: a 'doctrine' may be rooted in some real experiences and it may stand some chance of being changed through persuasion.

At the same time, it is instructive that the experience to which 'overwhelming force' was a response is categorized as 'pinprick provocations of the home-made rockets'. A non-event, that is. And if the experience that was interpreted and subsequently acted upon by the 'doctrine' was a non-event, then,

³ 30 percent of the *Financial Times*' editorial paragraphs featured the phrase 'occupation' as opposed to, for instance, 4.3 percent in the *Guardian* or 0 percent in the *Daily Telegraph* (Kaposi, 2014: 69).

in fact, even the *Financial Times*'s description of Israel starts to imply that state of lunacy.

Extract 14.

But if Israel needs to reflect on how its militarist tactics and continuing occupation strengthen its most militant enemies, Hamas should recognise how its attacks on Israeli civilians have enabled Israel to change the subject: from the occupation to threats to its existence. (Financial Times, 22 January)

The passage displays two crucial features. Its depiction of Hamas is in line with the newspaper's overall coverage: Israeli actions are depicted as *contributing* to Hamas's conduct. At the same time, whilst rhetorically juxtaposing what Israel needs to do and what Hamas needs to do (i.e. 'Israel needs to reflect on how... Hamas should recognize how...'), this juxtaposition is clearly asymmetrical. The effects of Hamas action on Israel merely influence (and are used as ammunition by) *Israeli rhetoric*. Hamas's 'attacks on Israeli civilians' are depicted not as contributing to Israeli determination to fight and utilize the doctrine of 'overwhelming force' but as *helping* Israelis to 'change the subject' from embarrassing facts. It is almost as if rockets fired indiscriminately on Israeli civilians are, somehow, welcome in Israel.

In Extract 13, the *Financial Times*' perspective on Israeli conduct could to some extent be taken to mirror the newspaper's perspective on Hamas. In line with the newspaper's take on Hamas, the idea of the 'doctrine of overwhelming force' suggested an account given in terms of some genuine (if flawed) intellectual content arising out of real world experiences, and not in those of essential violence or evil or lunacy. It therefore promised the continuation of a radical alternative to the discourse of non-relations as previously witnessed in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian*; and the realization of the discourse of relations initially represented by *The Times*' treatise of white phosphorous.

However, the promise of this perspective may subsequently have been lost. Extract 14 displayed a flat mitigation of Hamas's actions, and, correspondingly, implicit denial of any genuine origin of Israel's 'doctrine of overwhelming force'. Thus, it displayed the newspaper's inability to offer the same kind of *relational perspective of understanding* Israel as it did, consistently and coherently, hitherto with Hamas; and, hence, it also made that perspective of understanding Hamas start to sound little more than mere *whitewashing*. Just as in the case of *The Times*, in the *Financial Times* too the promise of a relational account and the possibility of a critical yet empathic stance towards both agents of the war ended very close to the habitual allocation of straight blame and innocence.

5. Discussion

Reading about the discourse on the conflict in historic Palestine can make us feel doomed. There are those arguing that dialogue is impossible because one side of the debate is biased, even antisemitic or abusing the term antisemitism to advance its suspicious agendas (cf., Harrison, 2006; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2008; Philo and Berry, 2004, 2011; Wistrich, 2011). And there are those arguing that dialogue is impossible because *both sides* occupy polar (and incommensurable) opposites (Bunzl, 2007; Fine, 2009; Klug, 2009). Either way, to establish the 'give and take of arguments' (Klug, 2008: 287) or non-violent forms of solidarity (Sheldon, 2016, 2017) appears virtually impossible: political-moral hope of human relationships are dominated by existential fear.

This paper started by asking what relationships between the main agents of the conflict were allowed in the political-moral imagination represented by the British broadsheets. And, indeed, one of its main conclusion must be that the arguments of the editorials scarcely left us with space for *any relationship* other than violently destructive ones. To be sure, on the surface conservative newspapers ultimately accepted Israel's argument for launching the war whilst (left-)liberal ones argued for negotiations. Yet when considering the structure of respective arguments, the permanent question irrespective of political orientation was: *who is to blame* and *who* (by and large) *is innocent*? Total Israeli innocence in the conservative press was matched by absolute condemnation in that of the progressives; whilst demonization of Hamas met with Hamas's role being trivialized to the point of virtual innocence.⁴ Underlying the apparent discussion of political and moral merits, therefore, a quasi-mythological discourse transpired (Lynch, 2012). Of real significance was not different degrees of responsibility, but the urge to keep the black-and-white essences of purity and impurity apart from each other (Kaposi, 2014).

This, then, was an important story to emerge from the analysis of the editorials. In fact, it was the overwhelmingly dominant empirical story. But it was not the only story.

For, in common with what might be considered an emerging line of research in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the present paper also identified a discourse of relations in addition to that of incomparable essences (cf., Sheldon, 2016). It found the conservative *The Times* to advance a very strong critical line concerning the responsibility of the Israel Defense Forces; and the liberal *Financial Times* to construct an argument where Hamas (and at points arguably Israel too) was not conceived of emerging from and acting out some isolated essence of innocence or violence, but was accounted for with regard to past and present relations. Thus, in the place of a discourse where the 'other' is a radically inalterable, inescapably incommensurable (and often essentially violent) 'Other', we have found a discourse where that 'other' (and, hence, this 'us') can be engaged with (Benjamin, 2016). In short, the discourse of existential fear was replaced by that of political-moral hope.

This, then, was yet another important story to emerge from the analysis of the editorials. In fact, it was perhaps the most important *theoretical* story. But it too did not amount to the full story.

The emerging perspective adopted by the present paper is certainly not that of optimism/idealism – to be then opposed to pessimism or crushed by realism so called. The discourse of relations that was detected in *The Times* and the *Financial Times* eventually appeared to have (or, at any rate, came very close to have) broken down. If anything, this state of affairs might have demonstrated precisely how difficult it is to actualize political-moral imaginaries different from the established essentializing ones, and how hope might actually become *more* rather than less difficult to actualize as it is becoming *more* possible (Mitchell, 1993).

Nonetheless, what the paper did also demonstrate empirically was that even where the discourse of incompatible essences and inevitable violence dominates and ultimately prevails, the prospect of relations is still there. As such, we can look at the (however minuscule) instances

⁴ See fn 3.

where it appears; analyse the conditions from which it emerges; and understand the dynamics of its possibly being taken over by the fearful discourse of isolated and violent essences. We can, that is, adopt a theoretical perspective which is capable of preserving and thereby extending those relations. In the place of who is a Jew and who is an Arab; who is right or wrong; what is true and what is false; who is innocent and who should be blamed, we can ask how these questions and concepts emerged out of various forms of human relations. That is to say, how to bridge the very gaps these questions open up, how to repair the relationships they ripped apart, and how to heal those wounds they might have caused.

Editorial sources:

Daily Telegraph

Hamas and Iran pose a threat to the world. 29 December, p. 17.

Guardian

Killing a two-state solution: Gaza air strikes. 29 December, p. 26.

Gaza: Israel and the family of nations. 14 January, p. 32.

Gaza: More, but worse. 10 January, p. 34.

The Times

In defense of Israel. 10 January, p. 2.

Israel's cause is just but some of its tactics are self defeating. 16 January, p. 2.

Financial Times

Bombing Gaza is not a solution. 29 December, p. 8.

The ruins of Gaza. 22 January, p. 10.

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